

Why the TV Audience *Ppt 2/22/78* Tuned Out on 'King'

Do Americans Tend to Avoid the Tough Topics?

By Tom Shales

First NBC announced it would begin its three-part docu-drama, "King," the story of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., on Sunday, Feb. 12.

Then ABC said it would show another action-packed episode of its violent "How the West Was Won" at the same time on the same night.

And then CBS scheduled a sure-fire, rabble-rousing Burt Reynolds movie, "Gator," opposite those shows.

In the ratings, "Gator" came in



first, "West" second and "King" a distant last.

It would seem apparent from this chronology that NBC's ambitious, \$5-million; heavily publicized "King" got counter-programmed into oblivion. Counter-programming means taking the wind out of a competitor's sails by sneaking up with a blockbuster at the last minute to thwart a best-laid plan. Counter-programming is always a popular sport among the networks, but it gets especially vicious during the so-called comprehensive "sweep" periods of audience measurement, like the one now going on.

But Paul L. Klein, NBC's executive vice president for programs and the man who scheduled "King," does not think the program failed because of tactical maneuvers. He has another reason. It isn't pretty, but if there's even a grain of truth to it, it's pretty discouraging.

"Counter-programming? That's for dummies. That's for stupid people," says Klein in his flatly conclusive way. "Everybody's caught up in scheduling. All the idiots are saying it's scheduling. That's not it at all."

The reason "King" failed, Klein believes, is that American viewers find

See AIR, B4, Col. 3

From top, Cicely Tyson and Paul Winfield in "King," Lauren Hutton and Burt Reynolds in "Gator," Elyssa Davalos and Bruce Boxleitner in "How the West Was Won."



Dr. King and the civil rights movement still to be threatening—so threatening as to be unwatchable.

"The American public really doesn't want black people around," Klein says. "Roots' they watched, because 'Roots' was nostalgia. 'Roots' was the good old days. People had slaves, they beat them, they cut off their feet, whatever. 'King' was different.

"We have upper-income blacks working at the network who were horrified at the 'King' ratings. They couldn't believe it. They didn't know people still hated them."

Competitors of Klein's might consider such strong statements sour grapes. "King" didn't just get disappointing ratings; it got miserable ratings. The first chapter was the week's lowest-rated show. Lower than "CHiPs." Lower than "Celebrity Challenge of the Sexes." Lower than "Shields and Yarnell."

Artistically, "King" was hardly perfect. It had many flaws. But the subject matter, for television, was topical dynamite, many of the performances were exceptional, and advance press on the program in national media laudatory; one magazine called it "towering."

Yet with all this, people didn't just fail to watch "King"; most avoided it fanatically.

"The lead-ins had nothing to do with it," Klein says when asked about this possibility. A lead-in is the preceding show on the schedule. "It's true it had a weak lead-in ('The Great Wallendas') the first night, but the 'King' ratings actually went down from the little lead-in that it had.

"On Monday, the lead-in was our highest-rated show of the week, the Bob Hope special. A 41 share! The 'King' rating immediately after was half that. People couldn't get to their sets fast enough to change the channel. Lead-ins have nothing to do with this; that's absolute nonsense.

"They didn't try it. They didn't tune in to start with. We had very weak competition on Monday night and we still got no audience."

Only on Tuesday did "King" escape third place in the ratings. It barely beat out a CBS movie, "Twilight's Last Gleaming," for second (behind the ABC "Happy Days" platoon). Maybe that means that there is one subject TV viewers want to hear even less about than racial strife: "Gleaming" touched ever so gingerly on the Vietnam War.

American TV reviewers do not invariably opt for fluff over substance, but they do tend to avoid almost every tough perspective on hard reality that the occasional provocative prime-time show tries to offer.

"60 Minutes" is not the weekly exception to this rule, either. The program doesn't really serve up bitter pills of truth or doubt—just tasty placebos in the form of decorative exposes. There is often a sex-angled story to snare viewers, and there are



James Arness and Fionnula Flanagan in "How the West Was Won."

many tales of people being gypped on small scales (one recent hot item told us that folks get bilked at carnival games—what a scoop). "60 Minutes" is delightful entertainment.

Network news departments fight to get documentaries into prime time, but almost without exception these programs are poorly rated. ABC News did a fine hour on returning Vietnam veterans, "The Class That Went to War," late last year. The week it aired, it ranked 62nd of 62 rated programs in the Nielsens. That tired old deadbeat "Barnaby Jones" on CBS, a program with no redeeming value whatsoever, with not even a spark of vitality on any level, got a rating more than double that of "Class" in the same time period.

The other networks don't bother to counter-program against documentaries, since everybody knows they don't have a hope anyway. But "King" was considered a potent audience draw. CBS juggled its strongest Sunday night sit-coms ("All in the Family" and "Rhoda") and brought in "Gator" to fight it.

"We were probably as surprised as NBC was that 'King' did not do better, particularly since 'Roots' did so well," says CBS programming executive Steve Mills. "I watched it and thought it was very well done." But as for

Klein's theories about why "King" failed—"interesting, but it's just one man's opinion. We know 'King' was a big disappointment to NBC," Mills says.

And some people did watch the program. "This was a segmented audience show," says Klein. "I believe it was very intensely viewed in the upper 20 percent of the population." He means the upper 20 percent on the socio-economic scale. "It got nothing in the other 80 percent. That's all that happened. We got everybody who read about 'King' in advance. We got every literate human being in the United States. The people who watched 'Gator' didn't watch it because they'd read about it. Working-class people watch working-class shows. They watch 'Gator.' They watch the s---kickers."

Why was the mass audience, in record numbers, riveted to "Roots," then? "Roots" was an uplifting experience and a non-threatening one as well. It was set in the safe long-ago, Klein says.

Whites could watch it and feel only vicarious guilt—candy guilt. "King" dealt with subjects still in headlines, still painful in recollection, still fresh in the national consciousness. Klein notes bitterly that perhaps if NBC had promoted it as the story of Dr. King's murder (a la the sleazy CBS

production "Ruby and Oswald") and not as the story of Dr. King's life, more viewers might have been tempted to tune in.

To base dire conclusions about American TV viewers and their racial attitudes on the basis of how "King" did in the ratings is pretty risky business.

But how risky is it, really, to study the weekly Nielsens, observe how poorly most half-serious, relevant programming fares, realize that folderol of every conceivable puerile and insipid sort draws what amounts to a national full house by comparison, and conclude that the great American television viewer is a lazybones?

Television viewers are like FDR when he went to the theater proclaiming, "I do not wish to be harassed" by the play. But television isn't theater. It could be a reality medium with pockets of escapist fantasy, instead of what it has become, which is entirely the opposite. The real chicken-and-egg question, though, is whether TV viewers are lazy by nature or whether they have been conditioned into stupor, apathy and escapist gluttony by 30 years of kiss-kiss, bang-bang network television programming?

We may never know. It is possible there is a profound futility in even wondering.